SHAHID ATHAR



25 Most Frequently Asked Questions About ISLAM

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Published: 2005
Tag(s): Islam "Questions about Islam" Allah Muhammad Questions

Introduction

The pluralistic American society is changing from being a "melting pot" to a "salad bowl"' in which all ingredients are encouraged to preserve and display their distinct individual taste and flavor. However, even though Islam is a major religion with over 1 billion followers worldwide and over 6 million in the U.S.A., some Americans still think it is a cult, some believe all Muslims are terrorists or have 4 wives or ask me if my wife puts on a veil, walks behind me or does belly dancing for me! Thus, the misconceptions about Islam continue because of a lack of correct information about the basic teachings of Islam.

The ongoing crisis in the Muslim world and the misrepresentation of Islam sometimes by the media challenges us to answer questions by our non- Muslim friends about our way of life in a simple and concise language. I have given many lectures to non-Muslim school and college students, church audiences, inter-faith gatherings, and have appeared on radio and TV talk shows.

Thus, based on actual questions asked from me due to their ignorance about Islam, my simplified answers are presented in this booklet. I thank all those who reviewed the manuscript for their valuable input. However, I take sole responsibility for the contents of this booklet.

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What is Islam?

The word "Islam" means **peace** and **submission**. Peace means to be at peace with yourself and your surroundings and submission means submission to the will of God. A broader meaning of the word "Islam" is to achieve peace by submitting to the will of God.

This is a unique religion with a name which signifies a moral attitude and a way of life. Judaism takes its name from the tribe of Juda, Christianity from Jesus Christ, Buddhism from Goutam Buddha and Hinduism from Indus River. However, Muslims derive their identity from the message of Islam, rather than the person of Muhammed (Pbuh), thus should not be called "Muhammadans".

Who is Allah?

Allah is the Arabic word for "one God". Allah is not God of Muslims only. He is God of all creations, because He is their Creator and Sustainer.

Who is a Muslim?

The word "Muslim" means one who submits to the will of God. This is done by declaring that **"there is no god except one God and Muhammad is the messenger of God."** In a broader sense, anyone who willingly submits to the will of God is a Muslim. Thus, all the prophets preceding the prophet Muhammad are considered Muslims. The Quran specifically mentions Abraham who lived long before Moses and Christ that, "he was not a Jew or a Christian but a Muslim," because, he had submitted to the will of God. Thus there are Muslims who are not submitting at all to the will of God and there are Muslims who are doing their best to live an Islamic life. One cannot judge Islam by looking at those individuals who have a Muslim name but in their actions, they are not living or behaving as Muslims. The extent of being a Muslim can be according to the degree to which one is submitting to the will of God, in his beliefs and his actions.

Who was Muhammad?

In brief, Muhammad (Peace be upon him) was born in a noble tribe of Mecca in Arabia in the year 570 AD. His ancestry goes back to Prophet Ishmael (Pbuh), son of Prophet Abraham (Pbuh). His father died before his birth and his mother died when he was six. He did not attend a formal school since he was raised first by a nurse as it was the custom those days, and then by his grandfather and uncle. As a young man, he was known as a righteous person who used to meditate in a cave. At age 40, he was given the prophethood when the angel, Gabriel, appeared in the cave. Subsequently, the revelations came over 23 years and were compiled in the form of a book called the Quran which Muslims consider as the final and the last word of God. The Quran has been preserved, unchanged, in its original form and confirms the truth in the Torah, the psalms and the Gospel.

Do Muslims worship Muhammad?

No. Muslims do not worship Muhammad(Pbuh) or any other prophets. Muslims believe in all prophets including Adam, Noah, Abraham, David, Solomon, Moses and Jesus. Muslims believe that Muhammad (Pbuh) was the last of the prophets. They believe that God alone is to be worshiped, not any human being.

What do Muslims think of Jesus?

Muslims think highly of Jesus (Pbuh) and his worthy mother, Mary. The Quran tells us that Jesus was born of a miraculous birth without a father. "Lo! The likeness of Jesus with Allah is the likeness of Adam. He created him of dust, and then He said unto him: Be and he is" (Quran 3.59). He was given many miracles as a prophet. These include speaking soon after his birth in defense of his mother's piety. God's other gifts to him included healing the blind and the sick, reviving the dead, making a bird out of clay and most importantly, the message he was carrying. These miracles were given to him by God to establish him as a prophet. According to the Quran, he was not crucified but was raised into Heaven. (Quran, Chapter Maryam)

Do Muslims have many sects?

Muslims have no sects. In Islam, there are two major schools of thought, the **Shia** and **the Sunni**. Both have many things in common. They follow the same book - Quran. They follow the same prophet Muhammad (Pbuh). Both offer their prayers five time a day. Both fast in the month of Ramadan. They both go for hajj, pilgrimage to Mecca. Those who follow Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh), in accordance with his sayings and actions, are called Sunni and those who in addition follow the sayings and views of Ali (Muhammad's son-in- law), as the rightful successor to Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh), are called Shia. Shia means a partisan (party of Ali) and it started more as a political party to help Ali in his conflict with his political adversaries. Most Shias live in Iran and Iraq while the rest of the Muslim world is mostly Sunni. Shias comprise about 16-percent of the Muslim population.

What are the pillars of Islam?

There are five major pillars of Islam which are the articles of faith. These pillars are 1) **the belief** (Iman) in one God and that Muhammad (Pbuh) is His messenger, 2) **prayer** (Salat) which are prescribed five times a day, 3) **fasting** (Siyam) which is required in the month of Ramadan, 4) **charity** (Zakat) which is the poor-due on the wealth of the rich and 5) **hajj** which is the pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime if one can afford it physically and financially. All the pillars should be of equal height and strength in a building in order to give the building its due shape and proportions. It is not possible that one would do hajj without observing fasting or without practicing regular prayers. Now think of a building which has pillars only. It would not be called a building. In order to make it a building, it has to have a roof, it has to have walls, it has to have doors and windows. These things in Islam are the **moral codes** of Islam such as honesty, truthfulness, steadfastness and many other human moral qualities. Thus in order to be a Muslim, one should not only be practicing the pillars of Islam but should also have the highest possible attribute for being a good human being. Only then the building is completed and looks beautiful.

What is the purpose of worship in Islam?

The purpose of worship in Islam is to be God conscious. Thus the worship, whether it is prayer, fasting, or charity, is a means to achieve God consciousness so that when one becomes conscious of God, in thought and in action, he is in a better position to receive His bounties both in this world and the hereafter.

Do Muslims believe in the hereafter?

God is Just and manifest His justice, He established the system of accountability. Those who do good will be rewarded and those who do wrong will be punished accordingly. Thus, He created Heaven and Hell and there are admission criteria for both. Muslims believe that the present life is a temporary one. It is a test and if we pass the test, we will be given a life of permanent pleasure in the company of good people in Heaven.

Will the good actions of the non-believers be wasted?

No. The Quran clearly says that, "anyone who has an atom's worth of goodness will see it and anyone who has done an atom's worth of evil will also see it" (Quran 99:7-8). By that it is meant that those who are non- believers but have done good will be rewarded in this world for their good deed. On the other hand, those who do good if they are Muslims, they will be rewarded not only in this world but also in the world hereafter. However, the final Judgment is up to God himself. (Quran 2:62)

What is the dress code for Muslims?

Islam emphasizes modesty. No person should be perceived as a sex object. There are certain guidelines both for men and women that their dress should neither be too thin nor too tight to reveal body forms. For men, they must at least cover the area from the knee to navel and for women, their dress should cover all areas except the hands and face. The veil is not essential.

What are the dietary prohibitions in Islam?

Muslims are told in the Quran not to eat pork or pork products, meat of the animals who died before being slaughtered or the carnivorous animals (as they eat dead animals), nor drink blood or intoxicants such as wine or use any illicit drugs.

What is Jihad?

The word "Jihad" means struggle, or to be specific, **striving in the cause of God**. Any struggle done in day-to-day life to please God can be considered Jihad. One of the highest levels of Jihad is to stand up to a tyrant and speak a word of truth. Control of the **self** from wrong doings is also a great Jihad. One of the forms of Jihad is to take up arms in **defense of Islam** or a Muslim country when Islam is attacked. This kind of Jihad has to be declared by the religious leadership or by a Muslim head of state who is following the Quran and Sunnah.

What is the Islamic Year?

The Islamic year started from the migration **(Hijra)** of Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD. It is a lunar year of 354 days. The first month is called Muharram. 1996 AD is in Islamic year 1416 AH.

What are the major Islamic festivals?

Idul Fitre, marks the end of fasting in the month of Ramadan and is celebrated with public prayers, feasts and exchange of gifts. **Idul Adha** marks the end of the Hajj or the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. After the public prayers, those who can afford, sacrifice a lamb or a goat to signify Prophet Abraham's obedience to God, shown by his readiness to sacrifice his son Ishmael.

What is Sharia?

Sharia is the comprehensive Muslim law derived form three sources, a) **the Quran** b) **the Sunnah** or traditions of Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) and **c) the ijma** (consensus). It covers every aspect of daily individual and collective living. The purpose of Islamic laws are protection of individuals' basic human rights to include right to life, property, political and religious freedom and safeguarding the rights of women and minorities. The low crime rate in Muslim societies is due to the application of the Islamic laws.

Muslims also use the consensus (*ijma*) of Muhammad's(Pbuh) companions (*sahaba*) and Islamic jurists (*ulema*) on certain issues, and drawing analogy from the essence of divine principles and preceding rulings (*qiyas*). In situations where no concrete rules exist under the sources, law scholars use *qiyas* — various forms of reasoning, including by analogy. The consensus of the community or people, public interest, and others are also accepted as secondary sources where the first four primary sources allow.

Was Islam spread by the sword?

According to the Quran, "There is no compulsion in religion" (2:256), thus, no one can be forced to become a Muslim. While it is true that in many places where Muslim armies went to liberate people or the land, they did carry the sword as that was the weapon used at that time. However, Islam did not spread by the sword because in many places where there are Muslims now, in the Far East like Indonesia, in China, and many parts of Africa, there are no records of any Muslim armies going there. To say that Islam was spread by the sword would be to say that Christianity was spread by guns, F-16's and atomic bombs, etc., which is not true. Christianity spread by the missionary works of Christians. Ten-percent of all Arabs are Christians. The "Sword of Islam" could not convert all the non-Muslim minorities in Muslim countries. In India, where Muslims ruled for 700 years, they are still a minority. In the U.S.A., Islam is the fastest growing religion and has 6 million followers without any sword around.

Does Islam promote violence and terrorism?

No. Islam is religion of *peace* and *submission* and stresses on the sanctity of human life. A verse in the Quran says, [Chapter 5, verse 32], that "anyone who saves one life, it is as if he has saved the whole of mankind and anyone who has killed another person (except in lieu of murder or mischief on earth) it is as if he has killed the whole of mankind." Islam condemns all the violence which happened in the Crusades, in Spain, in WW II, or by acts of people like the Rev. Jim Jones, David Koresh, Dr. Baruch Goldstein, or the atrocities committed in Bosniaby the Christian Serbs. Anyone who is doing violence is not practicing his religion at that time. However, sometimes violence is a human response of oppressed people as it happens in Palestine. Although this is wrong, they think of this as a way to get attention. There is a lot of terrorism and violence in areas where there is no Muslim presence. For example, in Ireland, South Africa, Latin America, and Sri Lanka. Sometimes the violence is due to a struggle between those who have with those who do not have, or between those who are oppressed with those who are oppressors. We need to find out why people become terrorists. Unfortunately, the Palestinians who are doing violence are called terrorists, but not the armed Israeli settlers when they do the same sometimes even against their own people. As it turned out to be in the Oklahoma City bombing, sometime Muslims are prematurely blamed even if the terrorism is committed by non-Muslims. Sometimes those who want Peace and those who oppose Peace can be of the same religion.

What is "Islamic Fundamentalism"?

There is no concept of "Fundamentalism" in Islam. The western media has coined this term to brand those Muslims who wish to return to the basic fundamental principles of Islam and mould their lives accordingly. Islam is a religion of moderation and a practicing God fearing Muslim can neither be a fanatic nor an extremist.

Does Islam promote polygamy?

No, polygamy in Islam is a permission not an injunction. Historically, all the prophets except Jesus, who was not married, had more than one wife. For Muslim men to have more than one wife is a permission which is given to them in the Quran, not to satisfy lust, but for the welfare of the widows and the orphans of the wars. In the pre-Islamic period, men used to have many wives. One person had 11 wives and when he became Muslim, he asked the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh), "What should I do with so many wives?" and he said, "Divorce all except the four." The Quran says, "you can marry 2 or 3 and up to 4 women if you can be equally just with each of them" (4:3). Since it is very difficult to be equally just with all wives, in practice, most of the Muslim men do not have more than one wife. Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) himself from age 24 to 50 was married to only one woman, Khadija. In the western society, some men who have one wife have many extramarital affairs. Thus, a survey was published in "U.S.A. Today" (April 4, 1988 Section D) which asked 4,700 mistresses what they would like their status to be. They said that "they preferred being a second wife rather than the 'other woman' because they did not have the legal rights, nor did they have the financial equality of the legally married wives, and it appeared that they were being used by these men."

Does Islam oppress women?

No. On the contrary, Islam elevated the status of women 1,400 years ago by giving them the right to divorce, the right to have financial independence and support and the right to be identified as dignified women (Hijab) when in the rest of the world, including Europe, women had no such rights. Women are equal to men in all acts of piety (Quran 33:32). Islam allows women to keep their maiden name after marriage, their earned money and spend it as they wish, and ask men to be their protector as women on the street can be molested. Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) told Muslim men, **"the best among you is the one who is best to his family."** Not Islam, but some Muslim men, do oppress women today. This is because of their cultural habits or their ignorance about their religion. Female Genital Mutilations has nothing to do with Islam. It is a pre Islamic African Custom, practiced by non Muslims including coptic Christians as well.

Is Islam intolerant of other religious minorities?

Islam recognizes the rights of the minority. To ensure their welfare and safety, Muslim rulers initiated a tax (Jazia) on them. Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) forbade Muslim armies to destroy churches and synagogues. Caliph Umer did not even allow them to pray inside a church. Jews were welcomed and flourished in Muslim Spain even when they were persecuted in the rest of Europe. They consider that part of their history as the Golden Era. In Muslim countries, Christians live in prosperity, hold government positions and attend their church. Christian missionaries are allowed to establish and operate their schools and hospitals. However, the same religious tolerance is not always available to Muslim minorities as seen in the past during Spanish inquisition and the crusades, or as seen now by the events in Bosnia, Israel and India. Muslims do recognize that sometimes the actions of a ruler does not reflect the teachings of his religion.

What is the Islamic view on contemporary issues

a. Dating and Premarital sex:

Islam does not approve of intimate mixing of the sexes, and forbids premarital or extramarital sex. Islam encourages marriage as a shield to such temptations and as a means of having mutual love, mercy and peace.

b. Abortion:

Islam considers abortion as murder and does not permit it except to save the mother's life (Quran 17:23-31, 6:15 1).

c. Homosexuality and AIDS:

Islam categorically opposes homosexuality and considers it a sin. However, Muslim physicians are advised to care for AIDS patients with compassion just as they would for other patients.

d. Euthanasia and Suicide:

Islam is opposed to both suicide and euthanasia. Muslims do not believe in heroic measures to prolong the misery in a terminally ill patient.

e. Organ transplantation:

Islam stresses upon saving lives (Quran 5:32); thus, transplantation in general would be considered permissible provided a donor consent is available. The sale of the organ is not allowed.

How should Muslims treat Jews and Christians?

The Quran calls them "People of the Book", i.e., those who received Divine scriptures before Muhammad (Pbuh). Muslims are told to treat them with respect and justice and do not fight with them unless they initiate hostilities or ridicule their faith. The Muslims ultimate hope is that they all will join them in worshipping one God and submit to His will.

"Say (O Muhammad): O people of the Book (Jews and Christians) come to an agreement between us and you, that we shall worship none but Allah, and that we shall take no partners with Him, and none of us shall take others for Lords beside Allah. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are those who have surrendered (unto Him)." (Quran 3:64)

What about Hindus, Bahai, Buddhists and members of other religions?
They should also be treated with love, respect, and understanding to make them recipients of Invitations to Islam.

Suggested Readings

1. The Holy Quran (A-Yusuf Ali trans.) - Amana Corp., MD
2. Islam in Focus (H. Abdalati) - Islamic Teaching Center, Plainfield, IN
3. "Towards Understanding Islam" - (A. Moududi) - ATP, Indianapolis
4. "Reflections of an American Muslim" (Shahid Athar) - Kazi Publication, Chicago.